



UNITED STATES COMMISSION
FOR THE PRESERVATION OF AMERICA'S HERITAGE ABROAD

U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad

Visit to Belarus and Poland

September 10-16, 2017

Introduction/Background

U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad is an independent agency of the U.S. Government, established by law in 1986.

Its mission is to help protect and preserve the sites associated with the cultural heritage of American citizens with roots in Eastern and Central Europe. Its mandate is to identify and report on cemeteries, monuments, and historic buildings, especially endangered properties. It obtains assurances, through agreements with the governments of the region, that these properties will be protected and preserved. Consistent with Congressional intent, the Commission also works to mark, restore, and preserve sites with private funding.

The law provides for 21 Members appointed by the President, with one designated as Chair. The President names seven Members directly, and seven each in consultation with the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and with the President pro tempore of the U.S. Senate. Members are not paid for their service. The principal role of Members is to raise funds for and oversee site preservation and memorialization projects.

The Commission, working in cooperation with the Department of State, has reached agreements with 25 nations on the preservation of cultural properties. The most recent agreement, entitled the Agreement on the Protection and Preservation of Certain Cultural Properties, was signed with the Government of Belarus in 2016 at a ceremony in New York by Belarus Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei and Commission Chairwoman Lesley Weiss.

Delegation

Led by Chair Lesley Weiss, the delegation included Commission Members Abba Cohen, Eric Schwerin, Gary Zola, Lesley Israel, and also included Susan Sandler, U.S. Department of State Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues Deputy Envoy.

Belarus

The purpose of the visit to Belarus was to follow up on the September 2016 bilateral agreement on The Protection and Preservation of Certain Cultural Properties and to review the progress of a survey of Jewish cemeteries in Belarus being conducted for the Commission by the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative (ESJF).

Matters Discussed:

- Status of the survey, including a site visit to one of the cemeteries in the survey with Chief Rabbi of Belarus Mordechai Raichinstein and the ESJF team.
- Recent reports of construction and development on the Jewish cemeteries of Mozyr and Gomel with Alexander Yatsko, Deputy Minister of Culture and Dmitri Ilyakhin, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Heritage site issues with the leadership of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities.
- Consultations with U.S. Chargé d'affaires Robert Riley and Embassy staff on U.S.-Belarus relations.

Poland

The purpose of the visit to Poland was to participate in the dedication of two Commission memorial projects: a Jewish cemetery/ Holocaust mass grave memorial in Kaluszyn and a Holocaust mass grave memorial in the Zalesie forest.

Other meetings included:

- U.S. Ambassador to Poland Paul Jones and Embassy staff on U.S.-Poland relations and the preservation of the Jewish cemetery in Kalisz.
- Jaroslaw Sellin, Secretary of State, Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, to build upon the 2004 Agreement between the Governments of Poland and the United States on the protection and preservation of cultural sites, and to review the surveys on Roma and Jewish cultural sites, and cultural properties that have been preserved and memorialized since the Agreement was signed.
- Wojciech Kolarski, Undersecretary of State in the Chancellery of the President to discuss the President's agenda for heritage preservation.
- Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich and Jewish community leadership on the status of Jewish cemetery restoration.
- Monika Krawczyk, CEO, Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) on the ongoing partnership with the Commission.



Ivenets, Belarus, September 12, 2017: Commission Chair Lesley Weiss and Member Eric Schwerin examine the remains of tombstones at a Jewish cemetery. Commission Member Lesley Israel, not pictured, also visited the cemetery, one of hundreds of Jewish cemeteries in Belarus being surveyed for the Commission by the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative. Commission Member Abba Cohen also visited, observing the entire cemetery from its perimeter.



Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Warsaw, Poland, September 14, 2017 (from left): Commission Member Abba Cohen, Deputy Minister and State Secretary Jaroslaw Sellin, Commission Chair Lesley Weiss, and Commission Member Eric Schwerin.



Kaluszyn, Poland, September 14, 2017 (from left): Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich, Father Wladyslaw Szymanski, Kaluszyn Mayor Marian Boszynski, Israeli Ambassador to Poland Anna Azari, Commission Chair Lesley Weiss (speaking), and Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) CEO Monika Krawczyk, at the dedication ceremony for a new memorial at the site of the Jewish cemetery.

Before World War II, some 5,200 Jews lived in Kaluszyn, constituting 60% of its population. The Nazis murdered nearly all of them. The cemetery and its headstones were destroyed as well.

With the help of Joseph Gellman, a descendent of Jews from Kaluszyn, the Commission financed the memorial, which was built by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland.



Presidential Palace in Warsaw, Poland, September 14, 2017 (from left): U.S. Department of State Deputy Envoy for Holocaust Issues Susan Sandler, Commission Members Lesley Israel and Gary Zola, Commission Chair Lesley Weiss, Undersecretary of State in the Chancellery of the President Wojciech Kolarski, Commission Members Eric Schwerin and Abba Cohen, and Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich.



Zalesie, Poland, September 15, 2017: Commission Chair Lesley Weiss, and Members Gary Zola, Eric Schwerin, Lesley Israel, and Abba Cohen at the dedication of a memorial to Jews murdered by Nazi troops in 1943. Participants also included Catholic Bishop Mieczyslaw Cislo, local Catholic priests, school children, teachers, and other members of the community.

The mass grave was located by Zbigniew Nizinski of the Lasting Memory Foundation in Poland. The memorial was built for the Commission under the supervision of Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich, with funds generated by Commission Member Harley Lippman.

Eleven murdered Jews, including three children, had escaped from the nearby Jewish ghetto in Ryki and hid in the forest. They were hunted down by the Nazis and murdered at the site.